

Innovative use of crowdsourcing technology presents novel prospects for research to interact with much larger audiences, and much more effectively than ever before

by Blog Admin

August 25, 2011

*As academics work to illustrate the true value of their work to the public, some might struggle to make a seemingly esoteric project seem relevant, accessible and interesting to the public at large. **Alastair Dunning** believes that the advancement of online crowdsourcing may hold some answers.*



In the push to make clear and unquestionable links between research and its effects on society, academics with seemingly esoteric projects might struggle to make their work accessible and interesting to the public. But projects centring on Scots language dictionaries, tattered Greek papyri and Bentham's philosophy of utilitarianism have all made the jump through innovative use of crowdsourcing. A growing number of projects, such as [Ancient Lives](#), [Transcribe Bentham](#), [Old Weather](#) and [Scots Words and Places](#), are making sophisticated use of the web to actively engage the general public as contributors to their research.

Old Weather, for example, invites the general public to transcribe naval logs, thus providing crucial meteorological data for climate scientists, as well as opening up sources for the history of the British navy. Transcribe Bentham works with a range of groups, in particular schools, to decipher the numerous papers of Jeremy Bentham. For such projects, securing user contributions is about much more than impact. They provide a venue for communities outside academia to play a meaningful role within university research, providing insight and knowledge, saving time, and facilitating the route towards high-quality outputs.

It is worth remembering that crowdsourcing predates the digital era; the Oxford English Dictionary was initially built on contributions from volunteers and there is a long tradition of active contributions from the public within many fields of the social sciences.

But the development of crowdsourcing on the internet has rapidly accelerated the sophistication of its methodologies. Recent projects have been particularly adept at using social media, developing refined mechanisms for ensuring that contributions are quality assured, working with large data sets, and creating interfaces that interact in a way that reduces complexity and confusion.

These developments mean that there are suddenly novel prospects for future projects to interact with much larger audiences than previously, and to do so in a much more effective manner.

Of course, there are plenty of research projects that do not lend themselves to this kind of public engagement whatsoever. That's fine. But for other projects, even those that could seem recondite in nature, there are opportunities to explore.

So as crowdsourcing advances, a vital factor will be the sensitivity with which the needs and motivations of those taking part are understood. If the research community engages the public in a utilitarian sense, as just cogs in a larger research wheel, then the whole methodology will become imperilled. Understanding what moves an inhabitant of a specific community, a child in the schoolroom, or the 'silver surfer' with a new internet connection, and making sure their input is suitably recognised is crucial.

Engagement, as Chris Batt pointed out in [his report](#) on the topic, must be a two-way conversation "knowledge co-creation and exchange rather than simply knowledge transfer: a dialogue which enriches knowledge for mutual benefit."

The task of the University of Oxford's [RunCoCo team](#) was to develop guidelines for projects wishing to develop digitised collections by asking the public to upload their own content or adding information to existing resources, as happened with the highly successful [Great War Archive](#). Equally, the Citizen Science Alliance is working according to firm principles on how to interact with their users, as articulated in Arfon Smith's [podcast on the success of the Galaxy Zoo project](#). Indeed, the Alliance is now looking for other researchers with whom to work with and is [requesting proposals for ideas](#).

If crowdsourcing is to continue to be embedded in research, then it is the principles and thinking drawn from RunCoCo or the Citizen Science Alliance that need to be adopted, adapted and implemented. There is a wealth of UK research that can be enhanced by the involvement of a engaged, knowledgeable and passionate UK public.

Related posts:

1. [Research and impact in the Middle East: strengths lay in science and technology](#)
2. [Universities need proactive and imaginative strategies to communicate their research and to achieve high impact scores](#)
3. [Australian news site aims to bring academic expertise to breaking news, leading to an innovative increase in social impact and public engagement](#)
4. [Don't swap the "Ivory Tower" for a cyber one: public engagement and the internet](#)
5. [Becoming a Networked Researcher – using social media for research and researcher development](#)